

Jesus Redefines Religion

Celebration and Defeat at McDonalds

I'll never forget the first time I personally experienced a **celebration of joy** and the **defeat of despair** all in the same evening. I was celebrating because I had finally convinced my Mom to actually eat at the McDonalds by our house. Why was this small thing a victory you ask? The McDonald's by our house had a playground or as McDonald's has branded them, a "Play Place." Nearly every time we went to McDonald's we were eating on the run and had no time for the play place, but not this time. This time we weren't just going to eat dinner, we were going to play. I waltzed through the double doors like I owned the place and proudly ordered my own kids meal with a Cheeseburger, fries, soda, and of course a happy meal toy.

After ordering we proceeded outside and I got permission to run off and pursue my real goal for the night, the playground. Everything was happening in slow motion, all at once I ran towards the rope ladder that led to the tunnels and slide. I climbed the ladder and proceeded to enter the maze tunnels that led to the winding slide. Shortly after entering the tunnels, my joy came to a resounding halt. I was not alone in the tunnels; no there were kids who were bigger, older, faster, and had already established themselves as the top presence on the playground. **In that moment, my celebration and feelings of joy dissipated** and I found myself **overwhelmed** with a sense of defeat. I no longer wanted to play, I simply wanted to hide.

Sucker Punches

We have all had experiences that were meant to be **joyous celebrations** but somehow move us to a place of **defeat and despair**. A prom date that does not go well because you show up in converse, jeans, and a band shirt while your date shows up in a pair of Louboutin's, with a Alexander McQueen dress, complete with a Birkin Bag. If you don't know what any of those things are is ok, just now that if this happens to you, it will be a moment of despair.

That example might seem trivial to some of you, but what about the family who has experienced the joy and celebration of pregnancy only to be destroyed by feelings of defeat and despair when it ends in a miscarriage? What about the newlywed husband that is supposed to be celebrating his first anniversary with his wife only to be informed that she no longer wants to be with him and asks him to remove his possession from the home they share? How about a cancer survivor that upon a routine visit with the doctor is told that their cancer has returned? The wife of a deployed soldier eagerly planning his home coming party only to be interrupted by a knock and a well-dressed chaplain on the other side of her door?

We all hope that we will never understand the pain that comes in the moments when life **"sucker punches"** us. The truth is that at some point it will, whether it happens directly to us or someone we are close to the "sucker punches" come. **In that moment, how will you respond?** When the joy of life is overcome by despair, where do you turn?

From Religion to Relationship

The story of God tells us that even in the **worst moments** of despair, defeat is never **final**. Scripture is full of stories from people like Joseph, Ruth, Samson, Peter, Paul, and The Woman at the Well. **These stories tell us about people that could have easily allowed despair and defeat to rule their life, but instead turned to God and somehow managed to find joy and a reason to celebrate in the midst**

of **adversity**. They also show us how we can respond in our life when adversity hits. Why is that? What makes them special? Well, to find the answer we only need to reference our story for today. As we heard earlier today, our story comes from the Gospel of Mark. **Mark is one of my favorite gospels because it moves so quickly and illustrates things with short, clear, and concise stories.** We find ourselves observing an interaction with Jesus and the disciples as they prepare to celebrate the Passover feast in the city of Jerusalem. They gather around a table to share a meal of unleavened bread, bitter herbs, wine, lamb and various fruit preserves used for flavoring bread and meat. As they shared in this joyous celebration of freedom and holiday – think Fourth of July for us – Jesus informed them that he was about to die. He also told them that he was going to be betrayed by someone who was at this very table with them. These guys were a family; they had literally spent the last three years living, traveling, and ministering together and now their leader was telling them that life as they knew it was over. **What was supposed to be a night of celebration suddenly became a night of defeat.** Jesus was going to die and one of their own was working to facilitate his “demise.”

However, immediately after “breaking the news” he then shares with them what has become one of the foundational teachings of our Christian Faith: Communion. In this moment of despair Jesus gives the disciple a reason to celebrate, he reveals to them that he must die because he is fulfilling the covenant that God has made with humanity. Jesus took bread and he broke it, he took wine and they drank it. **He took symbols of something old and created something new.** He took the religion the disciples knew and once again redefined it as a relationship. Jesus took the symbols of the Passover and once again used them as a way to celebrate God work in the lives of his people. **Only this time the results wouldn't be material, but spiritual.** Jesus took a moment of despair and gave us a reason to celebrate.

You have been given a gift that allows you to move from defeat to celebration. On the night we just finished reviewing Jesus once again revealed that he came to this earth to live, die, and resurrect in fulfillment of God's covenant plan. **That night Jesus redefined religion.** That night the story of Christianity switched from focusing on you and what you need to do, to God and what he has already done. **Relationship with God moved from an old covenantal system, to a new covenantal relationship.** No longer would I be about us doing the right things at the right time, it would be about what Jesus was about to do at just the right time. That night Jesus gave us the gift of a relationship with God and a tangible example of his unconditional love for those who choose to follow him and embrace the relational covenant he offers to all of us.

The Gift of Relationship

Earlier, I asked you, When the joy of life is overcome by despair, where do you turn? In light of what we just explored together, I want you to think about how you answer that question. It's not a question of “if despair” comes in your life, it's a question of when. Will you be ready to face it when does? **The great philosopher Rocky Balboa once gave his son a piece of advice, “Life is not about how hard we can hit, it about how hard we can get hit and keep moving forward.”** You live in a broken world. A world that often falls into despair, darkness, and at times dare I say hopelessness. **Some of you take a look around and you start asking painful questions like, “Why did this happen to them? They are good people, Why did their baby have to die? Others of you might take a more cynical look and think, “Well they probably deserved that... they aren't living right. Of course they broke up, that's why you get married before you live together.”** Then there are those of you who just go **numb.** You don't feel anything anymore. You got so fed with the despair and pain you saw that you stopped asking “why?” and your just saying “That's how it is.”

All of those responses to pain are rational. It is normal for you to be **confused**. It is normal for you to want to place the **blame** on “bad behavior.” It is normal for us to **embrace** the pain of reality. But you don’t have too.

Just as the disciples found refuge in Jesus’ promise during their darkest moment, **Jesus is offering you a refuge**. He is offering you a place to **find answers**. He is offering you a place to experience **grace and forgiveness**. He is offering you a place to find **hope**. He is offering you a relationship that promises to sustain you in the midst of anything this life can throw at you. That is how he redefined religion, he made it deeply personal and deeply relational. He isn’t just offering you eternal hope, He is offering you a companion that is never going to leave you and is going to see you through even the darkest experiences life can throw at you. He is offering you a place to turn when the pain becomes all too real. **He is offering you the love, grace, and the hope you need to sustain yourself through it all. You just have to reach out and take him up on his offer.** All the work has been done, you just need to believe it, embrace it, and walk in it.

Wherever you are at this morning, God wants to meet you there. Need help walking through the confusion of pain from a broken marriage? He will meet you there. Need help forgiving someone for how they hurt or abused you? He will meet you there. Need help understanding how the supreme being of the universe gave up everything so that he could have a chance to love you? He will meet you there. Struggling to understand the poor life choices of your children or grandchildren? He will meet you there. Need to understand how to walk with a friend in the midst of a death in the family? He will meet you there. Looking to help your coworker understand that addiction is going to ruin their life? It doesn’t matter what pain your feeling, brokenness you’re experiencing, or darkness you’re trying to resist. **Jesus will meet you there and he will meet you there with love, with forgiveness, and with hope.** Are you looking for him?

Redefinition Cont.

We all can show people where to find **joy** in the midst of despair and **celebration** in the midst of defeat. It all starts with understanding that Jesus has **redefined religion**. Our job is not to create a mold of more, philosophy, and spirituality that people fit into, it is to invite them into a relationship with us and with Jesus. We can all show the world where to find love, forgiveness, and hope even when it seems that despair and pain are the only options life is presenting to them. **We all have the power to do something, to impact someone for the sake of the gospel.**

Church are we prepared to carry on the mission that Jesus started? Are we prepared to be a place that extends relentless amounts of hope, love, and grace? For far too long the church has been really good at subtly saying, “Jesus offers you Love, forgiveness, and hope, but you have to fit our mold to find it here.” **We’ve become great at saying what Jesus taught but not really doing what Jesus did.** We have moved away from a life giving relationship and we have created a system that doesn’t always act on the teachings of its leader. To take this a step farther, I want to show you a tweet I came across on Thursday afternoon. If you don’t know what a tweet is, it is basically a quote that is 110 letters or less shared over an internet social media platform.

“What if the smile of Jesus—not our financial net worth, reputation, career successes, achievements, body type, religious devotion, or moral goodness—became our source of validation?”

God is calling is once again calling us out of a system and calling us into a relationship. In few moments we are going to partake in Holy Communion. Is a regular occurrence for us here, but I am hoping this time it will be a little different. As we reflect on the change of thought that took place when the disciples for experienced communion for the first time, I hope something similar happens for us. I hope that we recognize communion is not just part of our system, but it is a beautiful gift given to us to remind us of all that God has done for us. It is a constant reminder of when Jesus redefined religion.

If we going to be the church that God has called us to be, a group of people called to carry out God's mission, then we have got to embrace the way that Jesus redefined the way we express our faith. It's not just about doing or 'saying the right thing. It's about relationship with Jesus and with others. We've got to be a place that is ok getting our hands dirty, we have got to be a place that is ok with disagreeing, and we have got to be a place that is ok with doing whatever it takes to help our community experience the transforming power of relationship with Jesus. Jesus was **never** about inviting people to a place to hear about God, he was **always** taking God too people and his closest followers continued that legacy of redefinition, of going against the mold, of taking something old and **making it new**. Maybe it time for us to do the same? Then, maybe then, we might see the true power of God displayed as people come to know him, even in the midst of their darkest days.